



TRUE AS STEEL

CHAPTER V.

DISASTER!

"What will Raymond think?—what will Raymond say?"

That was the burden of anxious Edna Deane's heart, as the carriage that conveyed her from her school life into a new and unknown existence sped across the country.

Opposite to her sat her grim companion, motionless, erect, forbidding. Respect without severity had attended his every movement since leaving Hope, but he had insisted in that weird, oppressive silence that chilled, almost alarmed the warm, childish heart of Edna.

She had comforted herself with the resolve to write to Marshall as soon as she reached her new home, and had then ventured to address her somber companion.

"Won't you please tell me something about my father—the place I am going to?" she spoke in accents of tremulous pleading.

The man hesitated. Then, with evident reluctance, he said:

"You are going to your father—the father you love, you, who will make your life one of joy, wealth, and happiness."

"But, why all this mystery?" His brow clouded.

"He will tell you. Believe me, it is for the best. He has been under a cloud for years; his life has been nearly wrecked by the wickedness of others. Go to him with a free, fearless heart, willing to forget all the wrongs of his past, and to do something of good to his last days."

Edna chilled at the gruesome hint that the words contained. Forget all the world she had known? Did that include Raymond?

What could the dark mystery be? Her companion's lips were sealed on the theme after they had reached the train. He provided her with every comfort in the drawing-room section secured for her, and left her to her thoughts, telling her that they would not leave the train until after daylight.

Then a swift spin across the country, confused sleep, and morning, struggling in the embrace of a blinding snowstorm, the cars passing through a bleak, unfamiliar section.

Toward evening they alighted at a little village. It was still snowing, and, leaving her in the cheerless depot, her companion went to the stores about the place, returning with a frowning, anxious face.

"I am sorry," he said; "but can you stand a short walk in the storm?"

"I am not afraid of the storm; I rather enjoy it," responded Edna, cheerily. "Are we near—home?"

"Yes; that is, we cross two miles to another railroad. Then a brief ride, and your journey is ended. I cannot obtain a single vehicle to drive us over, and the train is due in two hours."

They started forth. Edna was brave and disdainful of the snow at first, but clogged footsteps, an occasional deep drift and blinding flakes soon made her breath come quicker, and her companion was compelled to aid her with the help of his arm.

They had got past the limits of the town now. Edna shuddered at the cheerlessness of the twilight-darkening landscape.

"We have not got far to go now," encouraged her companion. "This must be the bridge, or cross. Course, my child! Only half a mile more, and—"

"Oh! come back! come back! Look! That sign!"

Edna, following in the footsteps of her guide, who now went in advance to clear a path for her more dainty feet, had noticed the dashing torrent of water below the frail bridge spanning it, and half-oblivated by the snow, a rudely painted sign nailed to one of the bridge supports.

"What is it?" spoke her guide, half-way across the bridge.

"There is a sign. 'Danger! Mercy!'"

A wild, frantic scream completed the sentence. Appalled, Edna Deane shrunk back at a spectacle that froze her heart with terror.

At her very word, her companion, taking a step to one side, disappeared. The warning of danger had come too late. Through some snow-covered hole in the unstable bridge structure he went.

Splash! With strained eyes the agonized girl saw his body strike the foaming water torrent.

There was a cry for help, she saw his white face appear once, twice, in the turbulent flood, and then—the mighty stream dashed on, leaving her alone, unprotected, in the weird arms of the storm and the night.

Alone, sick at heart, hopeless, she continued to stare vaguely at the circling eddies that had engulfed her one protector in the world.

Alone on that dreary landscape, Edna Deane realized that she was penniless, homeless, hundreds of miles from friends, and the mystery of her life a mystery still.

CHAPTER VI.

LOST

"Hear that—look there!"

One of two men bound village-wagons uttered the words in a hurried, excited whisper, just as the unfortunate man who had been Edna Deane's companion and guide gave expression to his cry for aid.

They had just passed the somber-faced man and his grimish companion struggling through the snow, and, supposing they were bent down the river shore instead of across the unsafe bridge, had passed on without uttering a warning.

Now coming to the river path beyond a clump of trees, that wild cry had reached the ears of the younger of the two.

"Help! help!"

Looking quickly back and down the stream, he caught a glimpse of a form struggling in the wild waters of the torrent.

"They were strangers!" he ejaculated. "The bridge! They've tried to cross it, and have fallen through!"

It took them ten minutes fully to retrace their steps, running around the bluff timber stretch, until they reached the bridge. Horror-stricken, appalled, they stared blankly at the trodden snow and the gaping hole, through which the darkling waters showed twenty feet below.

"He went down—I saw him in the water," muttered one of the men.

"But the other?"

"What other?"

"The girl?"

"Ah, yes! I forgot. There was a girl with him. Jean, they're gone! Man and woman both, sure as fate!"

They glanced far down the river banks. They even lifted the stream for some distance, but found no trace of the supposed victims of a terrible mistake.

Thus it was that rumor, speculation and horror were rife at the little railroad settlement that evening, when the two men returned thither and told their tragic story.

This man remembered seeing the two arrive on the late afternoon train—that one described the gaunt, solemn-faced stranger seeking a conveyance to take them across country. A party was made up to make search for some trace of the bodies of the unfortunate, but, after finding the bleak shores of the river for hours, they returned bootless from their task at midnight, the swirling waters and increasing storm bidding fair to sweep away or cover up forever the identity of the man and the girl who had seemingly met death at the bridge.

As the reader knows, Edna Deane's guide alone had sunk through the broken plank. Edna herself, frozen with horror, had remained for a moment chilled to helplessness by the sudden disaster. Then, frantic with terror, vaguely hoping to reach some habitation and summon its denizens to attempt the rescue of her guide, she dashed blindly from the scene.

Through the heavy snow she ran, the darkening landscape showing a distant light. Towards it she bent her steps, lost it as a copse intervened, struggled on again, crossed a gully, reached a rise in the ground, and then leaned against a tree, panting for breath, and staring wild-eyed and alarmed all about her.

Her bedraggled dress, soaked shoes, chilled frame and anguished heart drove every sense to vivid suffering. Her companion was past earthly help, that the river had swept him away. The instinct of self-preservation, the fright of the moment dulled her memory of that terrible scene at the bridge; for utter loneliness and desolation spread before her; not a habitation, human being or light showed. She might have been a thousand miles from civilization for all its evidences that existed in her immediate proximity.

"Oh! where shall I go—which way, shall I turn? I am lost!"

Her tones were hollow, the utterance despairing, affrighted. Nature's delicate care, severely clothed to endure the rigors of such exposure, she felt that her strength and her will were fast deserting her.

She tried to summon all her fortitude and calmness. She decided that the town they had left an hour previous must lie beyond a level waste bounded on its farther edge with a ridge of trees and bushes. In that direction she started.

Knee-deep in a drift, swaying like a reed in the wind, she wavered, fairly in the center of the vast meadow.

Snow was all about her—earth and air seemed full of it. It dazzled her vision, it penetrated sleeve and hood, it choked and blinded her.

A fearful night, truly! The noise of the rising tempest rang out like the waves of angry sea. The storm had flapped out the baleful light of moon and stars. In the strength of a mighty gale, the wind raved and roared, sweeping the drifting snow about her like a shroud.

"I can go—no—further!"

With a moan that was a prayer, the delicate girl sank down. Her strength had given out completely. The snow came thicker, the winds blew faster, the ghastly white stretch before her began to be flecked with fire, as her overstrained nerves drove the fever-blood from heart to brain.

"Oh! the rest—the quiet!" she murmured, as she closed her eyes in that fatal delight which cold and exhaustion bring, to lure the deluded victim to the last long sleep. "Raymond—Beatrice—father! good-night—good night!"

A rare, ecstatic smile stole over her face. The suffering of life was merging into the delirium of dreamland. She had lain down to die—so young, so fair, so little realizing how near death grazed her bonny heart!

"Oh! let me rest; I am so weary!"

A rough contact, a blast of warm breath sweeping her face roused the bewitched girl to look up.

Then, with a frantic scream, she struggled to her feet and stood tremblingly staring at an intruder, the shock happily dissipating the lethargy that benumbed her senses, and bringing her a realization anew of the perils that menaced her.

The hideous form that her uncertain vision had exaggerated into some terrible creature of her fancy, brushed close against her, its rough hand swept her hands and face, thrilling them to a sense of feeling with the animal warmth of its rough caress.

A great homely faced horse, lost or strayed from home, like a puzzled wanderer over the black expanse, seeking shelter, the animal had saved her life.

"I was going to sleep!" panted Edna, with an affrighted shudder. "Oh! I must struggle on, for Raymond's sake. Heaven help and guide me, I cannot die here alone!"

She grasped the horse's mane as the animal neighed uneasily. Clinging to it she walked—was dragged along. The patient horse plodded forward. They reached a road. Minutes seemed at hour. Edna was conscious of relaxing her hold on her dumb guide from sheer weakness, of sinking helpless to the ground.

Was that a light shining near—gratefully near? She tried to cry out, but her utterance seemed choked and hollow, and its faint echo died in her own throat.

Surely, there was a house before her!—an open shed, too, beneath which the horse stood panting, but safe from the storm.

If she would only drag herself thither! But it was not to be. Exhausted nature could endure no more.

She closed her eyes with a moan of utter weariness and despair. Again her senses glided into that fatal dreamland of unreality. The snow seemed destined to smother a dark night's work by burying Edna Deane and the mystery of her fair young life beneath its mantle alike.

Ghostly fell the snow!

Fiercer rose the wild winds, more weird became the clogged, misshapen landscape; darker grew the night. The dainty form was outlined, first in a royal robe of ermine, then a little mound showed, then a greater one, and they—only a bleak, level expanse—the wanderer completely obliterated, as if a part of the great spreading meadow itself.

And ghostly fell the snow!

CHAPTER VII.

TOO LATE!

Raymond Marshall had swept from the presence of Beatrice Mercer with the joy of a man suddenly spatched

NAVAL CADETS.

WORK WHICH SOME OF THEM DO ON A CRUISE.

They Go Through Warship Drudgery by Way of Education—Routine of Duties at the Annapolis Academy.

A NEW departure has been made in the work of turning out young flagships for Uncle Sam's navy.

The little 800-ton gunboat Bancroft has been at the Brooklyn Navy Yard with thirty cadets on board, and the boys have been put through a system of school-work when they are commissioned officers on some of the great warships of the Nation.

The Bancroft also went cruising along New England, stopping at different points before it returned to Annapolis.

The thirty cadets on the Bancroft are greatly envied by the hundreds left at the academy, but the thirty do not know whether they are fit subjects for envy or not. When they are on board the vessel they would be willing to swap places with those left behind. But when the Bancroft is in some port, they wouldn't make the exchange.

Reasons for all this are as follows: Raymond Marshall decided that he could do but little except to await developments. His anxiety for Edna's welfare, however, his impetuous, impatient spirit, drove him to endeavor to learn what course Edna's mysterious companion had taken in so swiftly spurring her away to her friends.

He traced the carriage to the railroad town fifteen miles distant, but there the trail ended. Distance or direction taken by the fugitive there became involved points of speculation.

For a week he hung around Hopdale. His palping was neglected. His father was involved in deep business difficulties, which at any other time would have commanded his attention, but just now he could think of nothing but Edna.

He grew moody and taciturn, anxious and then alarmed. No letter arrived from Edna. He haunted the woods, spots endeared to him by their past meetings, but his anxious heart drove him to distraction as the fear grew upon him that his love was lost to him.

Then, either the mandate of a stern father or the plots of the siren-hearted Beatrice were operating to rob him of the bonny bride to whom his troth was plighted.

What did this girl know? Evidently everything there was to know. With subtle craft she had won her way to his soft wiles about the innocent and trusting Edna, until the latter had made of her a bosom friend—an exclusive confidante. She had tacitly acknowledged to Marshall that she knew where Edna had gone, but boldly, angrily, she had refused to tell him what he wished to know.

Fully comprehending the girl's resolute nature, Marshall gloomily decided that if he alone held the fate of his ever again meeting his loved and lost one that event would never transpire.

Wrought up to a maddening pitch of frenzy by the uncertainty and suspense of the hour, as well as by a sense of deep wrong and injustice, one evening Raymond Marshall went straight to the seminary.

"Beatrice Mercer shall tell me all she knows," he uttered fiercely. "I will plead, I will frighten her, but her secret shall be mine!"

The crowning surprise and disaster alike of the astonishing troubles of the hour was announced at the very portals of the seminary.

Miss Mercer was gone! Blankly and dolefully Miss Chandler imparted the bewildering information.

Gone? When—where? Beatrice Mercer, poor, friendless, dependent entirely on Miss Chandler's bounty and the meager means that her position as substitute teacher afforded her, gone? Abandoning a position which seemed to be a life-lease for her?

Yes, she had made the sudden announcement that morning. Thoroughly amazed her friends, she had packed up, demanding her salary, and had left without word of explanation concerning either her motives in resigning her position or her future intentions.

To the dumfounded and suspenseful Raymond Marshall this seemed the last and most cruel blow of fate. His final reliance was swept away. He felt assured that Beatrice Mercer knew of the whereabouts of Edna. Now, she, too, had disappeared—there was not a clue in sight!

Would she join Edna in her new home, and by forgery and misrepresentation wreck her faith in her lover, and work out her plots of jealousy and revenge?

Oppressed by this torturing thought, Raymond Marshall left Hopdale that night on a blind, hopeless quest for some trace of the woman he loved and the woman he dreaded.

Too late! The woman whose cruel hand was twisting his heart-strings with torture, because in her wild, erratic way she loved him, had twenty-four hours earlier in a plot so subtle and bold that his spirit would have quailed had he even so much as guessed its sinister motives!

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

PUZZLED THE PHYSICIANS.

Eight Months Old Baby in St. Louis Dies of Seizure Debility.

Physicians of St. Louis, Mo., have discovered a remarkable phenomenon in the person of a child eight months old, which died of seizure debility. The child was Herman Robert Burch, the son of a German man who lives in a cabin on the bank of the Mississippi River. The child was brought to Dr. Randall, of the North Side Dispensary, two weeks ago, for treatment. It was a monstrous, its head and neck were four times as large as a child of its age, and its face bearing all the marks of an old man. The head was covered with coarse hair, and on the face was a straggling beard.

Dr. Randall states that the babe's head was perfectly developed in every way, even to the bones, which were hard and brittle, as with the case of people of advanced years. He did not have a great opportunity to study the case, as his attention had not been called to it until the evolution was complete. During the time he was watching it, however, he searched in vain for a parallel case. All the medical works he could find gave him absolutely nothing of a similar nature, and the physician has merely let the matter pass as one of the more strange freaks of nature.

FOUND A WONDERFUL CAVE.

Cavern After Cavern Explored and the End Not Yet Reached.

There has been great excitement at Mansfield, Mo., over the reported discovery of the latest and largest cave in the State, the town of Hudson, on the St. Louis, Mansfield and Ava Southern Railroad.

For two or three years the earth has been sinking to such an extent as to cause no little uneasiness, and, in fact, a very noticeable depression in the earth was discovered some miles north of Hartsville. Upon investigation an opening to what is said to be the largest cave in the world was found.

Cavern after cavern, lined with pure onyx and traversed by subterranean streams, have been explored without finding an end. Portions of the stalactites found in one of the caverns were found to contain gold.

A Large Hog Run Probable.

It is now very certain that another large corn crop will be gathered this year. As last year's crop was the largest ever grown, it means cheap hogs and beef cattle for a year to come.

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